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A preferred vision for leading secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Great leadership is the key to achieving success within any organization, team, and in my case, school. A strong leader always tries to keep things positive and his or her team on the same page, trying to achieve the same goal. To achieve the highest level of success within a school, an educational leader must: develop and implement a shared vision, develop clear communication, provide strong instructional leadership, and develop and maintain a positive school climate.

This Research Paper by: Ralph J. Hughes

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A Preferred Vision for Leading Secondary Schools:

A Reflective Essay

A Research Paper

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Ralph J. Hughes

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Dr. David Else

The reason I became an educator is that I enjoy working with young people, care about the future, and like teaching students to make wise choices. I have always liked helping people strive to make themselves better either as a teammate, or a coach. Working with young people to improve themselves has always been very satisfying for me.

My major in college was physical education, but when I got out of college and started substitute teaching I found that I enjoyed working with behavior disorder students. These students need a great deal of guidance, attention, and someone who cares about how they live their lives. Everyday is a new adventure in the behavior disorder classroom, but these students recognize when someone cares about them. All young people, successful, or with behavior problems need to have someone who will give them a chance to improve themselves.

My ambitions as a teacher, coach, and leader have turned to a very intense, strong sense of drive to become a sound educational leader. The qualities that I feel will assist me in leading people the most are my humanistic and encouraging qualities. These are my strongest qualities in the classroom and on the competitive field. Striving to maintain a positive outlook with students, athletes, and peers while working toward a common goal of success for the team. As Whitaker (2003) states, "As leaders, our role is to continually take a positive approach" (p. 23). Being positive on a daily basis will be a reflection of positive leadership with all staff members.

Beliefs

Great leadership is the key to achieving success within any organization, team, and in my case, school. A strong leader always tries to keep things positive and his or her team on the same page, trying to achieve the same goal. When a school has great leadership, that school's educational team will follow the leader to achieve the goals that they set as a team. As mentioned previously, being positive is one of the greatest assets a leader will have at his or her disposal. Some leaders come by it naturally, and others have to learn how to use this quality. Leadership style is influenced by the way leaders view people, tasks, and organizations (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2003). Having a positive outlook on everything that I do has paid off in many positive relationships, successes for myself and others, and the opportunity to possibly lead a school in the future.

Besides being a positive leader, I will need to be organized and resourceful. Being organized with plans, staff, and students will assist those in school toward the goals they set. The leader must have the goals organized to the manner in which achieving them will be very attainable. The staff must be organized to ensure that the students will have a positive learning experience. Organization of the students, discipline, and pushing the students to be where they need to be when they need to be there will assist the teachers in having a positive learning environment. Being disciplined from day one, and consistent throughout

the school year strengthens the learning environment to achieve the highest level of learning possible for the school.

To achieve the highest level of success within a school, an educational leader must; develop and implement a shared vision, develop clear communication, provide strong instructional leadership, and develop and maintain a positive school climate.

Developing and Implementing a Shared Vision

According to the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC), Standard 1, a visionary school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community (Wilmore, 2002, p. 19). Having a shared vision of the type of school I would like to lead is a great way to start reflecting on the type of leader I would like to become. Bencivenga and Elias (2003) note, "Visionary educational leaders must look beyond school success and embrace the goal of life success, of helping children become active and committed citizens of their classrooms, schools, families, communities, and workplaces" (p. 60). That quote sums up a great deal of my feelings toward educational leadership. We need to prepare our children for life, not just trivial tests of knowledge. A clear vision of educational leadership is the most important aspect to leading because it encompasses all of the other standards of educational

leadership. The vision encompasses the other standards so that all of the pieces of the educational puzzle come together to make the vision complete and effective.

As a coach, my experiences have led me to become a much stronger leader. When coaching a team you must establish goals that your team would like to accomplish during the upcoming season. This is very similar to setting goals, or objectives as a visionary leader, which will help achieve a successful school. The educational leader needs to assess what he or she has to work with, put a plan together, and put it into action. According to Wilmore (2002), "There are four steps you must take to get there: development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of the vision" (p. 20). Developing a plan starts with setting goals, which should be done as a team. Coaching experience will come into play in developing a plan of attack to improve the school. One of the first initiatives that I would undertake as a principal is to get to know all the staff members as well as creating a cohesive unit by helping staff and faculty get to know each other. Trust is essential in the development of a team. There must be a solid level of trust among the team of teachers and support staff to move past the development stage of the visionary plan.

All strategies put together by a collaborative educational team need to be prioritized. There should be designated priorities of what is most important to least important, and the plan should be slightly flexible to the needs of the students and the staff. Collaboration is extremely important when assessing the

needs of a school. These needs should always be described in measurable terms. In the assessment of a school, Brown and Anfara, Jr. (2003) state in the *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*, "...they also understand their school—the nature, needs, strengths, and limitations of their staff members, and what it is going to take to achieve the desired result" (p. 17). If the staff knows each other well, they will be able to understand each other and assist each other within the areas of their strengths and weaknesses. Developing avenues of communication for the staff to get acquainted through meetings, newsletters, email, games, and other various team-building activities will improve the opportunities for the educational leader to share his or her vision.

Currently, educational leaders have much broader topics to take on when installing a vision in a school. Grimes and Smith (2004) state, "A vast array of programs, benchmarks, and professional development designs have been created to meet the demands of No Child Left Behind, as well as a multitude of state and local reform initiatives" (p. 40). As a self-contained behavior disorder classroom teacher, I can relate well to the comments from Grimes and Smith. With the Reading First grant, extra hours are needed for implementation of reading strategies to be put into the classroom to meet the NCLB initiative. As an educational leader, it is essential to use the NCLB initiative to improve teaching strategies and the reading skills of all students to enhance success in their lives.

While teaching in the behavior disorder area of education, I have learned to deal with a wide variety of people. An educational leader needs to try to meet the needs of all students. Wilmore (2002) states:

We are not here to promote only the education of those who are easy to teach, who speak English fluently, who fit school in between before-school athletics and after-school fine arts, who are clean and well fed, or who behave nicely every day. (p. 19)

Every student in the building needs guidance; what matters is how much guidance each student needs. Community involvement is needed in the development, interpretation, and implementation of the vision to improve a school. Parents need to be involved in the lives of students if they expect them to improve their overall performance academically, athletically, and socially. As an educational leader, I will involve the community through the use of newsletters, the school website, parent-teacher organizations, business partnerships, and many other means of communicating and collaborating. Sharing the vision with the community will assist the opportunities for success with all children.

Implementing the vision is a challenge to any educational leader, but it is an exciting challenge to create a more successful school. To maintain the success of the school takes all of the staff working on the same page. To reach this page, the educational leader should empower teachers with staff development responsibilities, committee duties, and the freedom to research and implement

proven instructional strategies to assist in giving teachers ownership of their classrooms to pursue successful student learning. Bencivenga and Elias (2003) state, “In schools with visionary leaders, teachers are empowered and given shared leadership responsibilities” (p. 68). It is my belief that if you are given more responsibility, you will be challenged to improve your skills as a leader and team member. Teachers also want to be supported in their classrooms with resources, curriculum, and discipline needed to navigate a successful school. When teachers are supported, they will follow the school’s vision facilitated by the educational leader to meet the needs of our students, and the staff.

Developing Clear Communication Within a School

Throughout my career as an educator and coach, communication has been a key component for students and athletes to experience success in the classroom and on the competitive field. Without strong communication, an educator can expect to experience little, if any success. When choosing to become an administrator, one of my strengths I plan to use often is communication. Communicating with all stakeholders within a school community is critical in the establishment of a strong educational system. There are many types of communication that relate to the success of a school. Communication with the students, parents, staff, and the community at large is just the beginning for the successful educational leader.

According to Bartlett, Weisenstein, and Etscheidt (2002), “Cooperation between home and school often can be directly related to successful education programs for students” (p. 34). A good educational leader will facilitate his or her staff to believe in this philosophy. The administrator will need to coach staff members on the importance of cooperation. Keeping in touch with the students’ parents will assist teachers in their effort to educate each student and to maximize success in the classroom. In the past, communication between teachers and the home has been by telephone, but there are many more options for communication to be used by the teacher in society today. Web pages, email, and cell phones, allow teachers to contact parents much more quickly than in the past. Student progress should be communicated to parents on a regular basis through mid-quarter reports, quarter reports, or classroom newsletters stating student achievements, or other means of communication to keep parents updated on their child’s progress. But in the end, the most effective means of communication occurs in face-to-face conferences.

When communicating with the home, a teacher needs to try to be as positive as possible. Bartlett, et al (2002) state, “A much better school climate is created if communication with parents occurs frequently and if they stress positive, not just troublesome, aspects of the child’s school experience” (p. 35). I have always tried to develop and maintain a positive relationship with students and parents, a positive, cooperative attitude will strengthen the rapport between

all parties involved with the child's education. There are times when the educator needs to be firm, but with a non-threatening approach to assist the student in making a good choice. Treating people with respect and common courtesy when communicating with them will help the educator make a positive impact on the students and parents.

As a future administrator, I feel communication with the staff is very important in creating a positive school environment. Effective communication can be done through many different avenues: conferences, staff developments, informal conversations, emails, letters, classroom visits, and keeping an open door policy for all staff members. With so many methods of communication, the main characteristic that an educational leader will need is to be approachable and open. The educational leader should keep teachers up-to-date on issues involving them, but not overwhelmed with information or emails that involve administrative issues not directly related to them. According to Brock and Grady (2004), "The principal's job is to enforce policies and procedures so teachers can teach" (p. 47). The principal needs to tell teachers what they need to know. The administrator needs to decide what information to share and what not to share with the staff.

Another important aspect of communication with staff is listening. Listening should be a priority in every personal and professional relationship. The staff of the school is the administrator's greatest asset in assuring that a school will be successful. Being a caring, interested person is a positive asset for

administrators. Brock and Grady (2004) note, "The principal may be viewed as a sympathetic listener or a trusted source of guidance" (p. 49). Being a caring listener will aid the administrator in building a strong rapport with staff, which in turn will strengthen the educational unit to maintain or reach a higher level of achievement. A good administrator will listen to staff members, but will not become involved in the personal issues in such a way as to be burdened with other people's problems. The administrator must remember to thank staff members when they do an excellent job. When I become an administrator I want to treat each member of the staff with respect and common courtesy, which is the way I like to be treated. The staff deserves nothing less.

Keeping strong communications in a school system requires the administrator to communicate with superiors. I would not want to be the administrator who forgot to communicate with his or her superintendent. Doing so would be a giant step backwards, and there is a good chance of losing the trust and respect of your superiors. I do not feel that you need to communicate every little factor, but do keep them updated on the happenings within the school.

In today's society, an administrator needs to be willing to use an interpreter, or be able to speak another language to communicate with students and parents who speak English as a second language. In the United States there are an increasing number of people who do not know English or do not use it effectively. I have had parents of students who do not speak English, so we had

to get an interpreter to communicate as clearly as possible the situation in which their son or daughter was involved. Using interpreters to communicate is becoming a more common practice among administrators to avoid problems that may arise with the lack of communication.

Technology is making communication more convenient than it has ever been. With the use of the Internet, email, and cell phones, people can be contacted more frequently than ever. Contacting staff, parents, and other stakeholders in a school community is quicker and easier with the type of technology that our society is developing. For those who do not have access to such technology, the educational leader will need to stay with the traditional means of communicating. The Technology Information Center for Administrative Leadership (TICAL) is a new site for school administrators to communicate with other school leaders across the nation. This is an excellent avenue to share new ideas, assist other administrators, or communicate situations that need to be addressed. Simpkins (2004) writes, "TICAL provides a quick route to information and resources that will help administrators make sure technology improves teaching, learning and school operations" (p. 26). Today, administrators need to keep up with many demands, and a system like TICAL, Internet, or email can assist the administrator in this effort.

An educational leader must be a very strong communicator to address the six Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL). Communication is key to the

sharing, implementing, and stewardship of a vision that will involve all stakeholders. Communication provides the educational leader with opportunities to promote a positive school culture, effective instructional strategies, and a comprehensive educational program. Effective communication is paramount in the areas of organizational leadership, collaborative leadership, ethical leadership, and political leadership in giving all students the best opportunity to learn.

Providing Instructional Leadership

In today's society, an instructional leader needs to have the ability to wear many different caps to assist teachers to educate students to the best of their capabilities. The Educational Leadership Constituent Council states that an instructional leader promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth (Wilmore, 2002, p. 32). The students' education is the number one priority for everyone involved in our schools today and it always will be. The instructional leader needs to instill a desire and passion for educating students in all of the staff. A desire to make a difference is the primary reason most educators enter into the teaching profession (DuFour, 2004). Guiding this passion and desire should be the shared vision of all stakeholders who are moving forward as each goal of the vision is met.

The instructional leader has many different challenges to address whenever he or she steps into the building. The challenges that often seem to take

precedent are parent conferences, phone calls, teacher requests, e-mail, and discipline. These management tasks can keep the instructional leader from the responsibilities of visiting classrooms, assessing teacher performance, and giving feedback to guide staff to educate students to their maximum potential. An instructional leader builds relationships with staff and students, provides teachers necessary resources to educate students, and motivates the staff and students to excel. Educators usually think of resources such as books, computer programs, or other hands-on materials that will assist the teacher in educating students. But resources go beyond the material products that assist learning. According to Zepeda (2004), "Resources go beyond staff development funds and center on emotional resources, such as encouragement, reassurance, and time to talk with the principal and others" (p. 151). The instructional leader assures teachers and students that he or she is present and is supporting them to achieve the maximum potential for their efforts. As a principal, I will make a great effort to be visible, encourage staff by expressing appreciation of their work, model the behaviors expected of staff, and asks staff for input relative to numerous decisions to better our school.

While the instructional leader is assessing staff performance, he or she must formulate a plan to assist teachers to improve their performance. The leader must look at student performance data, and the teaching strategies of the staff. To optimize teacher performance, he or she needs to understand the strengths and

weaknesses of all staff members as well as effective instructional research.

Teacher strengths are to be embraced and partnered with teacher weaknesses, thereby assisting the educator in the pursuit of increasing student performance.

The instructional leader creates an open atmosphere among staff and a respect of each person's ideas so that these ideas increase teacher effectiveness. DuFour (2004) states, "We need leaders who will help schools establish specific, measurable, result-oriented goals and who help each teacher and team understand how they contribute to those goals" (p. 67). Everything the instructional leader does in the building should follow the shared vision by working toward common goals set using the vision as a guide.

Professional development is a key to enhancing staff performance. Staff development should be relevant to the staff and useful to increase teacher effectiveness. The use of data plays an important role in identifying performance enhancing staff needs. The instructional leader empowers the staff by providing opportunities to attend clinics for new teaching strategies to improve teacher performance. Staff development should be guided by the shared vision to improve student performance through improved teaching strategies. Teachers need to be involved in the decisions, along with the relevant data to ascertain what the school will need for improving performance. Staff development is extremely relevant to any changes to be implemented within a school. For instance, a schedule change from the traditional 7 period day to the 4-block is a major

undertaking for any building. A staff will need to be aware and involved with the process to prepare them for upcoming challenges of such a major change. The involvement and depth of staff development to assist teachers in improving performance for this type change is immense and the whole staff must “buy in” to assure the continued success of the school. For this challenge, the instructional leader will need to be a coach and a mentor to the staff guiding them through the entire process while keeping the school’s vision in sight.

Teachers need to be aware of and willing to teach all students who make up their school’s diverse population. According to Fonville and Lewis (2004), “Teachers tend to teach to the average student without thoroughly assessing the individual needs of each child” (p. 24). Teachers need to be aware of individual differences that may influence the type of teaching strategies necessary to meet the varied needs of students. The teacher and instructional leader are accountable for the education of each student and need to assure parents and the community that they are ready to meet the needs of the students in their school. Since there are many strategies utilized by teachers within our schools today there is no excuse for not finding one that works for each student in their building.

For learning to take place, the instructional leader needs to assure students of their safety in the school setting. Instructional environments should be structured and disciplined in such a manner that students know and feel at ease so they can maximize their learning opportunities. Students must feel physically and

emotionally safe and valued, experience status and respect, experience meaningful learning, be encouraged, connect with caring adult role models, and believe learning is worthwhile (Kaplan & Owings, 2000). The instructional leader needs to be certain that each student is engaged in a positive educational experience. With the diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds present in schools today, there needs to be a great understanding that each student is important to the overall success of the school.

Teachers, administrators, and support staff need to become a team determined to achieve the goals that are set before them. The instructional leader needs to share the responsibility for the education of each student utilizing every stakeholder to maximize the learning potential of all students involved. As a future administrator, I will be the head coach and the teachers will be the assistant coaches who together determine the game plan to meet the educational needs of the students and implement that game plan into action to gain the victory that every student who steps into the school building learns everyday. Together, we will make great efforts to promote a positive school culture, provide effective instructional programs, apply appropriate practices to student learning, and design comprehensive professional growth plans for teachers to improve instructional strategies.

Developing a Positive School Climate

Developing a positive school climate is a challenge for even the strongest educational leader. Wilmore (2002) defines school climate as “The spirit or the ‘feel’ of the school” (p. 33). There are many different factors affecting a school’s climate everyday an educational leader walks into a school. Students have many different circumstances that they deal with outside of school that they may bring into the building on any given day. A student might not have had breakfast, let alone dinner the night before because his or her family cannot afford it. Problems could arise from a fight with a family member, good friend, or a significant other. There are too many circumstances to list them all, but educational leaders must be prepared to deal with and assist students with these circumstances that may have an adverse affect on their education and eventually the overall climate in a school building.

The school climate is interwoven with the culture of the school. In today’s school, the various cultures represented by students have a heavy impact on the climate within a school. According to Wilmore (2002), “It is up to the principal to facilitate a learning community that values the heritage, culture, values, and diversity of the school and community, including language, disabilities, gender, race, and socioeconomic status” (p. 34). In creating a positive school climate, the principal must create an environment where the students feel welcome, wanted,

and safe. At West High School, I am part of a school that is trying to improve the overall climate, which will in-turn improve a student's opportunity to learn.

Standardized test scores can have either a positive or negative effect on the school climate. The No Child Left Behind initiative has put huge pressure on educational leaders to show constant improvement from year to year. If a school does not perform well on a standardized test, they may be stereotyped a "low-achieving" school, or a School In Need of Assistance (SINA). This does not seem to help school morale, or the community's perceptions of the school. According to Aronson (2004), "The No Child Left Behind, as currently implemented in many schools, maximizes some elements of the stereotype threat" (p. 18). Principals must be positive with all stakeholders in a school to try to address negative stereotypes and give the teachers the resources necessary to improve school and test morale. Placing negative scores in the newspaper as a motivator has not worked on test score improvement, and it has damaging effects on a school's perception and attitudes among students, parents, and all stakeholders.

Crisis teams, safe schools committees, or code reds are all a result of the school shooting tragedies that have happened around the nation the past few years. With the Columbine High School shootings in Colorado the educational world totally changed in just one day. Schools are making efforts to be proactive in their approach to school violence. Safety of students is more paramount than ever with the threats of physical confrontations, bullying, harassment, drug and

alcohol abuse by students in and outside of the school building. A major influence on drugs and violence in a school is the increase in gang activity of students and the influence it has on our student's lives. Students need to feel free to express themselves, yet understand the "line" that is drawn with discipline policies that provide the structure that students seek and need to succeed within a school. While providing discipline, the principal should also demonstrate confidence in his or her students to give them ownership of their educational opportunities. Developing a positive school climate through safe and consistent discipline policies that are followed fairly, with integrity, and ethically, can do this. By acting in this manner, the leader is addressing Standard 5 Ethical Leadership.

Peer pressure can handicap the education of many students and make them feel very uncomfortable in the classroom. The perceptions of certain peer groups may cause students to distance themselves from actively participating in the classroom. Many students seem to find it easier to give put downs rather than put ups. Putting someone down because they have difficulty reading orally in the classroom, or making fun of the way someone looks is a major detriment to the education of many students in our schools today.

Another growing challenge is the increase in non-English speaking students. According to Smith-Davis (2004) "Language-minority students are the fastest-growing population in U.S. public schools" (p. 45). Many of these

students have great difficulty fitting in because it is difficult to communicate with peers, and teachers alike. Multi-lingual teachers and English as a Second Language programs are growing to improve the education of these students, which is increasing the achievement of the language-minority student.

The effective principal is constantly seeking and modeling ways to improve school climate. From my experiences in teaching, not every teacher greets the students or other staff with “good morning”, or “how are you”. Currently, the principal at West is making efforts to improve school climate that was very low before he arrived. It is improving, but more steps still have to be taken. Being welcoming, courteous, and respectful should be modeled by all staff. Yet, few do not seem to be on the same page as our principal and most of the staff. We need to improve teacher morale to rid ourselves of the “pity-party” that many find themselves falling into. Everyday teachers should strive for the excitement of the first day of school. As a future administrator, I will do my best to model positive behaviors, treating all staff and students with courtesy and respect. It takes great energy, but the principal needs to lead his or her staff in these efforts.

A school climate where all stakeholders are student advocates will definitely have a positive effect on the student learning. Rooney (2004) sums up the effects of being a student advocate “...accentuate the positive, recognizing and celebrating the joy and power of learning helps maintain a high energy level

and fosters continual clarification of the purpose of the school” (p. 87).

Newsletters with positive reports on performances of students in academic and extra-curricular achievements heighten the positive school environment. The use of the school website to report positive achievements by the students is also very effective. Communication with the media to accentuate positive performances can be excellent within the learning community toward building an exceptional school climate. Most of all applaud the teachers and thank them for their efforts toward the improvement of the school. Recognize staff for their extraordinary achievements as well as their everyday efforts as student advocates. Attitudes of teachers may reflect great leadership, but great teaching will always have a positive reflection on the leader.

Being a character educator who inspires students to be committed to moral and ethical actions and questions that build positive moral and ethical behavior are excellent methods to improve school climate (Elkind & Sweet, 2004). Being in touch with student needs, communicating and understanding the majority of students’ needs will build positive relations within the school. Making efforts to get students involved in extra-curricular activities will help build school pride; in return the school climate becomes a positive force in the education of the students. Staff and administrators also need to be present at extra-curricular activities to give the students the feeling that the staff really does care about the success of students. Just showing an interest in how a student performed at last

night's game, on yesterday's exam, or the school-play will build relations that promote a positive school environment. This communication can take place anywhere in the school and is a great method to improve school climate. Students just want to be cared for, and the adults who take the time to talk to them have an impact that lasts a lifetime.

The last influence on a positive school climate is just like Whitaker (2003) mentioned, "make it cool to care" (p. 89). The principal should go out of his or her way to promote a positive school climate. Make appearances all over the school, talk to students about everyday things that matter to the students personally. Build peer leaders who can assist the staff and administrators in building school pride. These peer leaders can be athletes, student government participants, or anyone who is involved in school activities that have an impact on student lives. These leaders can recruit students to become involved in school activities and model great pride in their school. It is a difficult task to ask of students, so the staff needs to promote leadership and model positive behaviors to the students.

As mentioned previously in this section, developing a positive school climate supports Standard 5 of the Iowa Standards for School Leadership (ISSL), Ethical Leadership. Developing a positive school climate supports Standard 1, 4, and 6, Visionary, Collaborative, and Political Leadership when addressing the

involvement of the community and the influence of the No Child Left Behind initiative. A positive school climate encompasses all six of the ISSL Standards, but most of all Standard 2, Instructional Leadership. Giving students a positive learning environment will enable them the opportunities to learn in a safe and conducive environment.

Conclusion

Educational leadership was a goal that I set for myself when I entered the Educational Leadership Program. This will continue to be a goal of mine for the future. Attaining an educational leadership position will be the first step in my journey as an educational leader. This program has helped me to build the confidence and knowledge to lead a school toward success.

What is best for students will be my main focal point as an educational leader. In doing so I will need to be certain that the people who make up the staff I lead are student advocates like myself and follow a philosophy that places the student first. Along with a staff of student advocates, parents will need to be informed of students' needs as well as support that may need to be fostered by clear communication.

In summary, taking the knowledge from the Educational Leadership Program and the experiences from my practicum should enable me to become a strong educational leader. The collaboration, cooperation, and efforts of the

whole cohort program has been a positive and challenging experience for me as a future educational leader and I look forward to bringing all that I have learned together for the future success of all students.

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